

Russia Must Be Punished for Breaking the Rules

By [Vasily Gatov](#)

October 02, 2014



Playwrights and political analysts alike are wondering exactly how this latest iteration of a classical drama will end. As for me, I wonder about what ordinary citizens will have to do to return to normal life. Personally, I think Russia is destined to pay a heavy price for "getting up off its knees" and immediately "kneeling down on others' heads."

Judging by the statements President Vladimir Putin made in Yalta on Aug. 14, he is prepared to withdraw from international agreements to pursue what he calls "Russian matters."

The State Duma is discussing Russia's withdrawal from the European Court of Human Rights, claiming that the Strasbourg court is "too politicized." By annexing Crimea, Russia abandoned its obligations under the Budapest Treaty of 1993 and possibly violated the Helsinki Accords that established European borders and inter-state relations in Europe and the world in 1975.

Putin's decision to take offense with the West and act out in this way has led to a situation

that will remain "on the table" for many years into the future, no matter how current events are ultimately resolved.

Despite all of the difficulties connected with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the subsequent formation of the Russian Federation, the transformation of the former republics into independent states, the unification of Germany and the bloody "divorce" in Yugoslavia, those events remained within the framework of the Helsinki Accords. Even the "Kosovo precedent" — despite the protests of Russia and Serbia — remained within the bounds of what was then considered acceptable.

The Helsinki Accords grew out of a fixation with borders: The accords permitted countries and blocs to deploy troops along conventional boundaries and prepare for war as much as they wanted, but the question of "disputed territories" was considered settled once and for all. Local interventions carried out within the confines of NATO and Warsaw Pact countries, such as those interventions in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968, were considered "internal affairs" of the respective blocs.

The war in Yugoslavia was a serious test of the "rules of the European community." It turned out that, although Russia was the legal successor to the Soviet Union, its neighbors — and the United States — no longer viewed it as a superpower.

By the time the 1975 pact was signed, the Soviet Union was a fully mature state that had created a nuclear shield, space program and a planned economy with its own hands. The Russian Federation is still a strange, underage successor to that deceased superpower, one that, in the eyes of the West, has not even managed to fully put its own house in order yet.

Russia was seen as a state with significant resource wealth and bad manners, but without an aggressive or bloody reputation. The West was generally ready to "cut Russia some slack" out of consideration for its diminished status in the international arena. But with the annexation of Crimea, the West no longer treats Russia as a "misguided juvenile delinquent," but as an adult who must eventually answer for his actions.

Even after Putin's eventual departure, Europe is unlikely to offer or even dictate favorable terms to Russia. The images of poor, starving senior citizens or drunken men on the public streets that Russia could point to in the 1990s to avoid full accountability before the international community do not work now.

The current Russian authorities have replaced those sympathetic images with news footage of heavily armed, masked men wearing no insignia and seizing territory from a neighboring state. These are the pictures that have formed Western attitudes toward this country.

The prevailing image is not an endearing babushka suffering hard times, a poor drunk who buys "bathtub gin" because he can't afford beer or even an off-kilter Duma deputy — just a ski mask with a pair of sinister eyes staring out.

It is obvious to me that Russia will pay a high price for having opened a Pandora's box with Crimea — and not so much in terms of sanctions, economic and social problems, budget deficits and so on, but more in the nature of Russia's future relations with the West.

Western societies are not accustomed to dealing with "problem situations" with their international partners: They prefer creating conditions in which such "situations" do not arise. Because Russia is now the biggest source of such problems, the West will probably seek ways to place limitations or restrictions on Moscow.

In particular, I think those efforts might focus on preventing the emergence of "hybrid regimes" by detecting them early and — in what would be a nightmare scenario for every Russian patriot — intervening in this country's internal affairs to preclude the appearance of malignant politicians and trends.

Bad neighbors, like Russia, not only make everyone around them uncomfortable: They drive down property values and decrease the effectiveness of cooperative institutions. In domestic life, such institutions include schools, the police, courts and municipal services. In inter-state relations, they include diplomatic ties, international organizations and the openness established by the Helsinki Accords.

The attempt to play the local bully in a modern world that concerns itself with mutual comfort and harmony, environmental problems and the quality of education is a fairly stupid position to take. States, like people, are social creatures: Faced with isolation, they reflect upon the causes of their plight as well as their own behavior. The new international architecture now forming around Russia — and especially on the Western side — is the architecture of isolation.

Its purpose is to provoke the Russian people to ask themselves why the outside world has stopped talking to them, to question the lies and hypocrisy coming from "within the family" and the decision to unilaterally seize a neighbor's territory. They should consider the fact that Russia will eventually have to make peace with the West, and that the West will not and cannot make that process easy for a country that has violated all of the recognized rules of conduct.

Whoever eventually replaces Putin will be faced with wholly justifiable demands from Russia's neighbors. They will range from questions of territorial claims to the need for border security, demands for transparency concerning Russia's armed forces and so on.

That successor will have to closely study a number of international conventions because the international community will require that Russia follow those rules to the letter. Worse, he will have to figure out that list of conventions for himself when faced with the cold attitude of his neighbors.

Considering their traditional distaste for restrictions, how will the Russian people respond to such demands? Badly at first. As the joke goes: How can you make a Russian jump off a bridge? Just hang a sign reading: "No Jumping Allowed."

However, they will have to learn — and not for the sake of imported Parmesan cheese or a visa-free regime with Europe, but so that at least the outside world will talk to them face to face, and not through the crosshairs of a gun sight.

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of WAN-IFRA. This article was originally published by the [InLiberty online magazine](#), and this is a shortened version of the original article. This is the third in a series of analytical articles and editorials in The Moscow Times about Russia's long-term strategic prospects.

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